

# Dispensing with Particulars: Understanding Reference Through Anaphora

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## 1. Brandom's theory of reference

The technical notion of *particulars* or *objects* as that which singular terms purport to refer to has been known at least since Frege to be highly theory-laden. Particularly from a non-representationalist point of view it is obvious that one cannot simply take some domain of particulars as somehow simply antecedently understood or given. Instead, even language-specific syntactic patterns may have a crucial bearing on the question of what may, under which circumstances, count as an object referred to (Schneider 1992). To see how deeply this issue is entangled in foundational discussions about reference, it suffices to have a look at its repercussions in philosophical and linguistic debates, e.g., with regard to the question of Meinongian 'nonexistent objects' (cf. the defense of some of Meinong's ideas in Parsons 1980) or to the many difficulties with abstract or fictional objects in, say, 'Millian' theories of singular terms.

From an inferentialist perspective on language pragmatics and semantics, Robert Brandom has tried to explicate the notion of particular object in terms of singular term use, giving a supposedly intra-linguistic, deflationary account of reference and rejecting the idea that reference should be viewed as some sort of word-world relation (Brandom 1994; 2000). In his view, objects are given or specified by equivalence classes of symmetrically intersubstitutable terms; more precisely, reference to particulars is seen as a social practice of attributing and undertaking what Brandom calls symmetric material substitution-inferential commitments, that is, very roughly, commitments to which terms are intersubstitutable *salva veritate*.

Brandom refines this general picture by an account of *anaphora* as the mechanism that lets linguistic tokenings *inherit* the substitution-inferential commitments (and entitlements) associated with other tokenings (Brandom 1994, 455 seqq.). Explaining anaphoric mechanisms is a vital part of Brandom's enterprise since these mechanisms are needed to account for several important and interrelated aspects of his overall account of language: First, an understanding of how *unrepeatable* singular term expressions, such as indexical expressions, provide a link to extralinguistic circumstances is needed in order to explain the *empirical* contentfulness of language use. Second, inter-personal anaphoric connections account for the social, interpersonal nature of linguistic communication.

As has been noted by some commentators, Brandom's theoretical outlook on singular term reference is, on the face of it, rather strained and idealized at least from a linguist's point of view (cf. Fodor and Lepore 2001). To give but one simple example, in many cases the possibility of substituting one singular term for another is subject to grammatical constraints such as concord. In fact, apart from the use of pronominals and other strongly context-dependent proforms it is rarely the case that speakers would use different context-independent descriptions for the same object; they would rather, on different occasions, make several different assertions about an object, assertions that are linked by an *anaphoric*

chain. This already suggests that, in some sense, anaphora might be the more primitive, object-constitutive relation vis-à-vis substitutional ones. Typically, it is only by using nominalization constructions that intersubstitutable singular terms come into being in the first place. As far as language acquisition is concerned, it seems plausible that mastery of anaphoric relationships between utterances (such as grasping the kind of semantic link between different utterance tokens containing the word *mama*) precedes, or is at least largely independent of, the ability to use different expressions (such as *mama* and *dad's wife*) that can be more or less always be used interchangeably. Perhaps more important in a philosophical context is the fact that there are serious problems on the semantic side, too; thus, it is possible to *understand* descriptions whose extensions are *known* to be empty, even though, in such cases, no substitutional commitments are undertaken – no other term can be taken to be coreferential with the one given. A remedy for this problem can be found, I think – but it requires looking at the anaphoric relationships empty singular terms may entertain to one another.

## 2. Inverting Brandom's order of explanation

In order to solve the above-mentioned and other issues, I propose to invert Brandom's order of explanation, taking the notion of *coreference* (i.e., the anaphoric relation holding between coreferential singular term *tokens*) as a theoretical basis for a deflationary account of linguistic reference and 'objecthood'. Similar to Brandom, the result is a non-representationalist view of linguistic reference that does not take some relation between (parts of) linguistic utterances and aspects or chunks of some possible or actual world as its starting point. It is possible (but not conceptually necessary) to explicate the notion of coreference as understood here in terms of Brandomian inferentialism, starting with an account of what an implicit and normative *practice* of *taking* two terms in actual discourse to be coreferential actually consists in. Of course, if one thinks along the lines pursued here, coreference cannot simply be defined as the property of different token expressions to refer to 'the same thing'. Suffice it to say here that, in prototypical cases, coreference can create a 'pragmatic link' between (aspects of) the utterance situation tokens involved – a link that cannot be created by other kinds of subsentential expressions. Two subsequently uttered sentences containing the adjective *red* are normally *not* thereby linked *qua utterance tokens*; in contrast, two subsequently uttered sentences containing the proper name *John* may give reason for a hearer to establish a pragmatically relevant connection between the two utterance tokens (e.g., upon hearing first *John is his room* and then being ordered *Summon John here* the addressee will probably go to John's room in order to carry out the order). The *kind* of 'link' created by coreferential terms is not some simple invariant but correlates, roughly speaking, with the kind of sortal that one would use in talking about phenomena of the respective kind. Deflationary though this approach is, it does allow for reconstructing ordinary 'reference talk', even in a much less artificial way than the one proposed by Brandom: An utterance like *In that utterance, the pronoun 'he' refers to John Doe* is true if and only if the

singular term *John Doe* is coreferential with the pronoun *he* in the utterance token in question.

### 3. Consequences and applications

The account of linguistic reference briefly sketched here shares many of its strong points with Brandom's approach, since, in many cases, Brandom's 'substitutional' analyses have a 'coreferentialist' analogue. For lack of space, only some hints can be given here. Thus, the account is highly neutral with respect to ontological questions, which helps to solve some well-known problems by actually dissolving them. Thus, Quinean concerns with the 'inscrutability of reference' simply do not arise when the basic question is not *which object* is referred to on a given occasion, but which other utterances 'refer to the same thing'. Similarly, the well-known quarrels about, say, description vs. 'Millian' theories, or the Kripke belief puzzles (Kripke 1980), can be given rather down-to-earth analyses that, incidentally, bear some similarity to the line of reasoning in Katz's "new intensionalism" (Katz 2004) without sharing most of its general outlook on semantic or metaphysical questions.

Less perspicuously, the account proposed here might help to throw into relief subtle preconceptions about what may or may not be regarded as a 'proper' particular for a theory of reference. The volatile intuitions surrounding the concept of rigid designation are a case in point: In the narrowly scoped reading of the sentence *The president of France might have been bald*, the subject is usually interpreted as a quantified expression of some sort; in ordinary parlance (not Brandom's, to be sure), it is assumed to denote different individuals in different possible worlds. On the other hand, a rigid interpretation (which takes the nominal phrase to denote some kind of "generic concept") cannot simply be dismissed on *a priori* grounds. Indeed, a 'generic' reading of the nominal phrase in question would seem rather natural in the context of a legal or political discussion of the duties or obligations of 'the president of France' or even 'the present president of France', when what is at stake is not a certain person but properties or requirements concerning a political function. Positing such kinds of individuals is not as far-fetched as it might seem; for instance, the term *the mice that inhabit my kitchen every winter* might be taken to denote a particular with remarkably complex identity criteria, pertaining to a reoccurring temporary presence of a group of animals whose members are possibly different every time.

The present proposal differs, however, markedly from Brandom's in being much less committed to a picture of reference as being 'about particular objects'. On close reading, this picture still figures prominently in Brandom: First, the particulars in a representationalist conception of reference are supposed to correspond to Brandom's equivalence classes of terms; second, singular terms, on Brandom's view, can get the empirical content they have only through entry moves of the language game, specifically, non-inferential perception reports that use unrepeatable linguistic items tied up anaphorically with repeatable ones. Empirically contentful terms are prototypically linked to classes of 'external circumstances' that Brandom calls "reference classes". This way, a surprisingly direct relation between linguistic expressions and a nonlinguistic reference class sneaks in, as it were, through the back door.

In stark contrast, the approach presented here allows for a much broader understanding of the semantic and pragmatic nature of anaphoric relations, even in cases where 'syntactically conditioned' anaphoric relations clearly *cannot* be correlated with the idea of one and the same 'thing' being referred to twice. In a sense, what is proposed here is a radically deflationary attitude towards the notion of object. To take a simple example, the two sentences *John was told that his mother had left* and *Every boy was told that his mother had left* are completely analogous as to grammatical structure; yet, Brandom would, similar to many logic-based semantic approaches, be forced to assume that the semantic analyses of the two sentences differ with respect to quantification, with the consequence that the anaphoric pronoun *his* must be treated differently in these two cases. However, a philosophical account of reference should be able to say something about why this difference is so difficult to explain to a layperson. This requirement becomes more urgent in a strictly *relational* view on grammatical structure as proposed in (Meyer 2003), where I argue that assigning a grammatical structure to a sentence token supervenes on pragmatically grounded relationships between this and other utterance tokens: If such a view is on the right track, then it is difficult to explain why the two sentences can be ascribed parallel syntactic structures in spite of differing significantly in their semantic makeup.

Indeed, the alleged semantic difference between our two example sentences virtually disappears in a 'coreferentialist' perspective, where both sentences receive a parallel treatment: The two terms in question can simply be said to be coreferential in both cases, the difference residing rather in what I have called above the 'kind of link' between the coreferential expressions. In other words, traditional linguistic issues concerning quantification and scope relations can be handled successfully in the account presented here. That the idea of denying any fundamental difference between the anaphoric relations in the two sentences is not simply out of place is suggested by otherwise widely differing conceptions that try to use a unified description for quantified and non-quantified sentences; a remarkable recent example is (Shapiro 2004) who, following ideas of Kit Fine and others, assimilates a sentence such as *Every sheep is white* to the type of sentence exemplified by *Dolly is white* by proposing a logic of arbitrary and indefinite objects that is suitable for real-world language processing tasks via semantic networks. Surprisingly, much recent work on knowledge representation in this area is compatible with the non-denotational approach I propose (see also Helbig <sup>2</sup>2008) and deserves to be placed under more scrutiny by philosophers of language.

## Literature

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